



A Review Essay

WHY MEN FIGHT

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FOR TOO LONG, military historians have attempted to adhere to Clausewitz's description of war as merely politics by other means—by which he meant the high politics of kings and ministers. To this they have added the primary units and nationalism as tools for leaders to manipulate common soldiers. But a new generation of professionals is supplementing this view, pointing to race, ideology, morality, discipline, and even sexuality as sources of motivation. Borrowing new social and cultural historical methodologies, three young scholars in particular offer strikingly innovative and telling interpretations of what bonds people in combat. Where some see the fog, they see the sinews of war, as they move the study of war beyond narratives of winning and losing. Profs Leonard Smith (Oberlin College), Craig Cameron (Old Dominion University), and Omer Bartov (Rutgers University) have recently published studies of one to three divisions that afford important insights into what holds armies together and drives them forward.

In August 1914, the French Fifth Infantry Division (5e DI) rushed into battle at Charleroi, losing 20 percent of its officers and a third of its men. On the front line, French citizen-soldiers found

themselves trapped between a German stronghold and their own commanders. The men knew that to continue their assault meant sure defeat; yet, the doctrine of offensive allowed no room for strategic retreat—an oversight that would eventually leave a hole in the line as well as too many grieving mothers and widows. One regiment took advantage of the confusion and commenced a less-than-strategic withdrawal.

Several weeks later, the Germans—attempting to trick their opponents into quitting the field by calling “*Sauve qui peut*” (“Every man for himself”)—found themselves heeded, as the entire 5e DI left Courcy. High command could not tolerate unilateral decision making by the troops and dispatched a series of memos that explicitly threatened to shoot anyone leaving the front but implicitly allowed soldiers to proportion effort and sacrifice to the tactical goals. By Christmas the soldiers could even “declare” a Christmas truce.

The result of this negotiation between officers and men endured for nearly three years. However, once given a few months respite from the lines in the spring of 1917, the beleaguered *poilus* (infantrymen) of the 5e DI collected their wits and “went on strike” rather than return for more. Faced

Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE 1996		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED 00-00-1996 to 00-00-1996	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Why Men Fight				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Air and Space Power Journal,155 N. Twining Street,Maxwell AFB,AL,36112-6026				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT Same as Report (SAR)	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 4	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

with the debacle of the Chemin des Dames offensive, they wanted to renegotiate the terms of their contract. Again, command could not allow such a blatant show of power by the men. Instead, it interpreted the strike as a mutiny, forcing military justice to mete out prison or death sentences for a few dozen men. Face saved, Marshal Philippe Pétain could then afford to renegotiate the proportionality of war, from a position enhanced by his show of force as well as by America's recent entry into the fray. During the war's final year, the citizen-soldiers fought aggressively and effectively to preserve the legitimacy of rights and the sanctity of honor as Frenchmen, according to Smith's *Between Mutiny and Obedience: The Case of the French Fifth Infantry Division during World War I* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994).

The laws of war—a societally and historically based set of codes—are all that distinguish soldiers from scoundrels and murderers. Without them, armies lose their legitimacy, and officers cannot command. Soldiers become disaffected, and the front disintegrates into sectors of mayhem. A clearly defined code of *jus in bello*, on the other hand, will drive soldiers to greatness, preserve their society, and allow generals to bring other resources to bear for their best chance to win.

Bartov's fascinating books *The Eastern Front, 1941–1945: German Troops and the Barbarisation of Warfare* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986) and *Hitler's Army: Soldiers, Nazis, and War in the Third Reich* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) argue that the Nazis' immoral ideology undermined the Wehrmacht's professionalism. With the invasion of the USSR in 1941, the German war machine plunged into an extended series of mass murders more representative of Hitler's fascism than of the Prussian General Staff, which had for decades provided the model of military modernity and effectiveness.

This disintegration undermined the Wehrmacht within the first year of Operation Barbarossa, as Hitler trapped his soldiers in circumstances even more nonnegotiable than the *poilus* would have dreamt possible. Whereas

French soldiers could cling to Republican ideology, only Nazi racial hatred, virulent anti-Bolshevism, brutal punishment, and guilt held the German army together. The lightning war had been premised upon technological and strategic superiority, and required the conquest of all of Eurasia to supply the resources needed for a long, sustained campaign. Blitzkrieg had to win quickly just to feed itself. But the Soviet Union was too large, too strong, and increasingly too sophisticated, so the Wehrmacht found itself bogged down in a horrifically large-scale front.

Because Hitler had needed a short, sharp campaign, he had planned for one, leaving his men completely undersupplied for Russia's winter. Pathetically, they padded summer uniforms with newspapers as temperatures fell far below freezing. Dozens of divisions went without provisions because the horses drawing supply wagons had died and were eaten. Without shelter, overworked, and criminally undersupplied, the men suffered from lice, skin infections, respiratory disease, frostbite, bladder inflammation, and a legion of psychological ailments. Deaths inflicted by their human enemies only punctuated this existential brutality. All order disintegrated as blitzkrieg became the Ostkampf (struggle in the East). One year of the invasion of Russia had reduced the Army of the East by 750,000—only a handful of them evacuated. Many of those were killed neither by Soviet soldiers and partisans nor by winter, but by the brutal and capricious discipline inflicted by the Nazi army upon its own. Compelled to expedite the Jewish holocaust, to burn thousands of Soviet villages, and to pillage food and clothes for their own survival, soldiers were also executed for failing to adhere to the Nazis' racial laws about consorting with the enemy. During the course of the war, the Wehrmacht "legally" executed some 15,000 German soldiers, mostly for this or for desertion.

German soldiers faced this brutality defenseless, without the ability to decide to retreat, the conviction that they were defending their homeland (despite claims otherwise), or even the barest of supplies. Nor could they rely on primary groups. For example, the Großdeutschland Division suffered 98 percent casualties within 14 months and

lost somewhere between two and three times its original complement through the course of the war.

Hitler's armies remained on the eastern front only because they had no escape, held together by Nazi ideology and the distance from refuge. After a year or two or three, the most humane of men were so brutalized that they could not help embracing Nazi ideology as the only rationalization available. To shoot 600,000 prisoners of war (POW) and participate in the process that starved, exposed, or overworked another 2.5 million to death, soldiers of the Wehrmacht embraced Hitler's *Kampf* (struggle) as their own. They had to dehumanize their opponents and to believe that the eastern front marked the line of apocalypse. Trained from childhood in the Hitler Youth, then in the army, they knew no other reality. The Nazi race war, with all its barbarity and lawlessness, comprised their world.

At the same time, half a world away, Americans faced analogous trials. Cameron's *American Samurai: Myth, Imagination, and the Conduct of Battle in the First Marine Division, 1941–1951* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1994) complements Bartov's work on the barbarization of war but faces a greater challenge in writing not about a fascist state but the world's oldest and most successful democracy. Instead of addressing "Roosevelt's armies," therefore, Cameron focuses on his own former service—the elite Marine Corps. In contrast to Nazi generals whose soldiers had served in the Hitler Youth since childhood, the Marine Corps took recruits who believed (at least nominally) in freedom and democracy—virtues generally seen as anathema to fighting effectiveness. Undeterred, the makers of the Marine Corps image instilled a doctrine that dehumanized virtually everyone—in the name of democracy.

During the interwar period, a few innovative and politically savvy generals had sought and found a new mission—amphibious operations—that reshaped the spirit of the corps. Because of the chasm between US grand strategy (which called for a defense of the Philipines) and the reality of scarce interwar resources, Navy and Marine planners understood that a war with Japan would see the fall and eventual recapture of the

archipelago. While the Navy concentrated on a Mahanian decisive battle, the Marines trained to invade islands.

By 1942 the worst case became a reality, and the corps set out to recapture the islands. By then, the Marines had become rigidly devoted to a masculinized doctrine that relied more on heroics than upon material. Their training program reflected this doctrine, teaching marines to work as a group and to dehumanize friends and enemies. Women (and by extension, homosexuals) became the first targets of this process as "others" against whom hard, self-reliant warriors defined themselves. Japanese fanaticism and atrocities played a large part in their becoming the second set of victims. At Guadalcanal, the Japanese fought with an intensity that appeared disproportionate to the marines' opinions of their likelihood for success. Fighting to the last man, as most warriors understand, rarely serves military effectiveness, and it barbarizes those who have to kill to the last man. The Japanese Bushido (code of chivalry) quickly pushed the marines farther from their self-image as warriors and closer to that of murderers.

To compensate for this loss of justification, the marines took on a third group of others—the American soldiers who fought alongside them. The US Army's mechanized view of war as a "process" further encouraged the marines to personalize the struggle. By the middle of the war, Cameron concludes, the men of the 1st Marine Division had internalized a worldview in which they measured themselves against those deemed sexually, racially, or militarily inferior. Each of these choices had costs as well as rewards. While the first allowed men to embrace the suffering of warfare, it became a fetish that degraded military effectiveness. While racism enabled men to kill their enemy at close quarters, it also undermined their sense of humanity, encouraging them to cut out POWs' gold teeth or to make necklaces of Japanese ears. In generating a sense of self drawn in contrast to American soldiers, marines failed to take ordinary precautions that not only would have saved more of their own lives, but also would have enhanced their military effectiveness.

Celebrating a half century of that war's out-

come, historians must acknowledge the costs of victory. Each of these young historians brings remarkable insights from the new social and cultural histories to a field too long dominated by a traditional discourse of winners and losers. If we accept the new interpretations, we find a more

complete and accurate picture of war: why and how men fight, what differentiates war from organized mayhem, and what separates victory from defeat. □